



On the border of Western and Eastern Christianity

The co-existence and conflicts of religions
in Southern Hungarian Bácska in the 18th century

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Hardly can one find in Europe a more appropriate field of historical investigation to understand the intermingling co-existence of different ethnic groups belonging to different religions than the one-time Southern Hungarian region called *Bácska* that is now largely a part of Serbia. This region, covering more than ten thousand square kilometres, had belonged to the Hungarian Kingdom until the end of the First World War, and in state administrative terms it had been identifiable with one of the counties of Hungary (Borovszky 1909).

In the 16th century the medieval villages and towns of Bácska fell victim to the Ottoman conquest forging ahead from south. During the Ottoman occupation that lasted for about one and a half century the population – and especially the Hungarian population – of the region got seriously reduced. In the 17th century South Slavic ethnic groups began to settle down in these uninhabited areas. The Habsburg royal court assisted the settlement of Serbs who did military service during the liberating warfare at the end of the 17th century. In this century besides the Orthodox Serbs considerable Roman Catholic South Slavic population also moved to this region. In their religious practice it was the Franciscan friars who played an outstanding role (Unyi 1947; Molnár 2002; Molnár 2004, 41–79). These Roman Catholic South Slavic people of Croatian origin coming from Bosnia had been referred to as *illyricus* in the contemporary Latin historical sources, but this comprehensive term had stood for various ethnic groups (in Hungarian *sokác*, *bunyevác*, *rác*) that were in close linguistic and anthropological kinship. These groups later were definitely distinguished by the 19th–20th century ethnographical investigations (Sarosács 1973).

In the 18th century, large-scale re-population took place: on the spots of the former, deserted medieval villages and towns gradually new settlements were formed. The present relations of the region are basically grounded in that period. The population of the modern era arrived in this region by mainly two ways: either in course of *organised* settlement movements or by *spontaneous* migration. *Organised* settlement was directed by the royal Habsburg court. An accepted premise of the Hungarian historical investigation is that the Habsburg court preferred and promoted the organized settlement of *Roman Catholic* Germans from the Southern parts of Germany. As a matter of fact, although it can indeed be observed that the majority of the population was Roman Catholic in the German „chess-board” villages whose structure had been carefully designed by engineers, but: as far as the royal and loyal attitude of the villagers is concerned this presumption seems to be rather stereotypical and misleading. Since we should take into consideration

that in the last decades of the 18th century the same royal court promoted the settlement of *Lutheran* Germans. Moreover, in course of organized migration Uniate Ruthenians also moved to Bácska from the far north-eastern region of Hungary. And finally, the greater proportion of this new population gradually and *spontaneously* moved to Bácska from northern and southern parts of the country. Spontaneous migration brought here mostly Hungarians, but to a lesser extent Slovaks and Germans as well. In addition, small Armenian colonies also settled down for example in Újvidék/Novi Sad (Gyetzai 1992; Báráth J. 1996, 37–45).

The distribution of the population in terms of nationality and religion was continuously changing in course of the 18th century, but unfortunately, these tendencies can hardly be tracked down due to lack of related statistics. We have at our disposal more or less exact data only from the 19th century. What can be pointed out with certainty is that the population of this region was extremely complex from both *religious* and *ethnic* aspects. At the end of the 18th century almost 400.000 people lived in about 100 settlements. Although the religious and ethnic diversity was characteristic of villages, it can be more clearly disclosed in the case of towns. Approximately two thirds of the population was Roman Catholic, and one fourth was (Greek) Orthodox. To this rates should be added the Protestant population (about 10 %) and the Jewish people (about 1 %). As far as the ethnic distribution is concerned, we may detect a relative majority of Hungarians besides which the number of Germans, Serbs and Roman Catholic South Slavic people was also considerable. The number of Slovaks, Ruthenians and Jewish people figured out only some percents (Bottlik 2003).

The religious distribution only partly indicated ethnic frontiers, but in some cases we may observe a tight connection between ethnic and religious identity. What can be stated for sure is that the Serbs were Orthodox, the above-mentioned South Slavic people were Roman Catholics, the Ruthenians and the Armenians were Greek Catholics, while the Jewish were Israelite. This situation was not so simple and clear with other nationalities. The majority of the Hungarians in Bácska were Roman Catholic, but also considerable groups of Hungarians were Protestant. The majority of Protestant Hungarians were Calvinist. Besides the Roman Catholic Germans, Lutheran and to a lesser extent Calvinist Germans also lived in this region. The overwhelming majority of the Slovaks in Bácska were Lutherans, and a minority of them were Roman Catholic (Báráth J. 1995, 11–19).

As it might be clear from this brief overview, the population of Bácska was really fairly various both in religious and in ethnic terms. Nevertheless, in compliance with their number within the whole population and due to the state administrative and royal decrees it was obviously the *Roman Catholic Church* whose privileges prevailed in the period. The whole region belonged to the Central Hungarian Kalocsa diocese and was under the authority of the archbishop of this diocese. This authority predominated not only over the Roman Catholic, but to some extent over each denomination.

Distinguished attention was paid to the *eastern* Christians who had entered a union with Rome, since then the Greek Catholic liturgy and church organization was only taking form. The majority of the Uniate Ruthenian population could be found in two villages in Bácska. On the occasion of bishop's visitations the problems arising from the union were listed, and the related decrees indicate for us the difficulties inherent in the procedure. Let me refer to some peculiar features of the wedding ritual in Hungary, namely the issue of wedding oath. During the 18th century in the Ruthenian villages of Bácska a

set of ecclesiastical decrees were necessary to implement into everyday practice this unit for it had been missing from the eastern liturgy.

The position of the *Protestants* during a period of five decades between the two main royal decrees was disadvantageous. And then this qualification can be regarded as an understatement. In this period, between 1731 and 1781 the publicity of Protestants' practice of religion was restricted and confined to only some given places. Usually it was only *private* practice of religion that was permitted. It meant that the Protestants were not allowed to build a church or an oratory, they could carry out worship only at home among family members. Protestant clergymen were under Roman Catholic ecclesiastical authority even in dogmatic issues (for instance the manner of christening). Mixed marriages could only be made by Roman Catholic priests, and even in purely Protestant marital proceedings it was only the Roman Catholic authorities that were competent. In the case of mixed marriages, the Protestant party had to provide a written document in which he or she agreed on that each child would be brought up as Roman Catholic. The Protestants were compelled to celebrate Catholic feasts. To enter any state administrative office one had to take an oath in which the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints were referred to. In this respect change took place only when the decrees (for example *Edictum Tolerantiale*, 1781) of the enlightened ruler, Joseph the II, were issued at the end of the 18th century (Kosáry 1983, 83–89, 386–396).

The Orthodox people were in a more favourable position than the Protestants. The Orthodox people were referred to in contemporary Roman Catholic ecclesiastical sources as *schismaticos* that is schismatic/dissident. The state support of Orthodox Serbs was preserved until the middle of the century since they carried out defensive military service. The royal court managed the issues of the Protestants and those of the Orthodox separately, and it regulated the practice of religion of the Serbs with a special agreement in the second half of the 18th century. In the former period at local level it often occurred that the ecclesiastical leaders did not really distinguish the Orthodox and the Protestants. Regarding the defence of Roman Catholic religion and faith it was the Protestants who were clearly considered as a more dangerous party compared to Orthodox people (Kosáry 1983, 89–93).

In those settlements where a considerable number of Orthodox people lived, they were allowed to build churches and to have priest without any constraints. Their own bishops had authority over the local ecclesiastical communities. Among their duties we may find only the observation of four Roman Catholic feasts (Christmas, Easter, Whitsuntide and the Lord's Day/Corpus Christi). In practice it meant that the pubs and stores were closed on these days. In the case of other minor feasts, these were closed only from 8 to 11 in the morning. All these decrees had real meaning and consequences in settlements whose population belonged to various denominations. In these mixed villages the bishop's visitations paid special attention to the behaviour of these "dissidents". In course of these visitations complaints on behalf of the Roman Catholic priest and the flock were collected and recorded.

Injuries and complaints naturally emerged among different denominations living close to one another. For example in a report from 1767, the Roman Catholic villagers of several settlements complained of the Orthodox, since according to them the Orthodox people did not observe Catholic feasts, and they even rang the bells on Good Friday. In this same year we might find a record according to which in the municipal council of a town the Orthodox inhabitants also had representatives, although they were in a minority position. The local magistrate was Orthodox, the notary was Roman Catholic, out of four

counsellors three were also Roman Catholic and one was Orthodox. The members of the municipal council were different people year by year. When the magistrate was Roman Catholic, the number of Orthodox counsellors got doubled. The supervisors were contented to see that in this way the Catholic majority was guaranteed in town management. Nevertheless, this system included the possibility of conflicts as well, or rather, the possibility of interpreting each controversial issue on a religious ground. It can be observed in comments such as: the Orthodox magistrate put the lay clerk of the Roman Catholic Church in the stocks for some unimportant remarks and he kept him there for over a whole night (Bárth 2003).

I have been carrying out investigations related to the 18th century religious practice in this region for more than ten years. I have applied the methods of micro-history and historical anthropology. My research is based upon primarily ecclesiastical and to a lesser extent state administrative sources. This rather brief presentation inevitably can account for only the surface of these investigations. I must remark that according to my experiences this topic calls for further decade-long research. I am deeply convinced that this historical research may promote our understanding of the recent past chaotic relations of this region.

The period under survey was a relatively *peaceful* one. The co-existence naturally brought about conflicts and mutual effects. But the conflicts in the 18th century were not large-scale. On the other hand the mutual effects and impacts were not really spectacular either, but micro-historical investigations may help us to reveal these. In the part to come, I would like to present some individual cases in connection with the relationship of eastern and western Christianity.

There are some natural parallel features in the Orthodox and in the Roman Catholic religious practice, which features can finely be pointed out with regard to dogma, liturgy and religious institutions. If we are interested in the phenomena of popular religiosity of everyday religious practice and piety, then we should scrutinize the level below the official elite religious systems by means of appropriate sources. I should add here that in the last decades in Hungarian folklore research the investigation of archaic or apocryphal folk *prayers* has begun to flourish, in which comparative aspects were also integrated due to popular prayers collected in Bácska. The comparative analysis of Hungarian and South Slavic folk prayers has revealed not only the interethnic exchange mechanisms of the genre but has also pointed out a possible inter-confessional exchange. In this procedure the lack of linguistic obstacles among the Serbs and the Roman Catholic South Slavic people is a significant factor. (Silling 2000)

The comprehensive investigation of various *shrines* from this point of view would also be of interest, but in this respect only some initial steps have been taken. Recently researchers' attention have been drawn to those minor holy springs of local or micro-regional importance that did not gain any official assent on the one hand, still, on the other hand, the people preserved and went on with their paraliturgical actions related to these holy springs throughout decades or even centuries. Along one of the affluents of the Danube, River Mosztonga, 14 such like shrines have been listed. Out of these only two were officially acknowledged and functioned as a spot and destination of pilgrimage visited by ten thousands of people. In the case of the other twelve shrines, the worship of trees, icons and Holy Virgin-images as well as a faith in the healing force of the sacred springs can be detected. This archaic religious phenomenon has a clear inter-confessional character. Several holy springs can be regarded as joint sacred places visited by both Orthodox and Roman Catholic people. The devotees belonging to various denominations

might have emerged either at different times or simultaneously. This latter case was only probable since adoration took place usually without priests (Beszédes 2000).

Besides the above-mentioned examples of the exchanges of *sacred texts* and *sacred places* we may also find historical data about the exchange of *sacred people* and the mutual employment of their services.

The town of Zombor (Sombor), that was one of the centres of our region, was the scene of a set of *exorcising* actions that took place between 1766 and 1769, and which were concentrated around the activity of a Franciscan friar (Bárth 2005; Bárth 2008). The population of Zombor in the 18th century was various and mixed to a great degree both in terms of religion and ethnicity. Roman Catholic and Orthodox religion were represented approximately by the same proportion (50–50 %). The majority of Roman Catholics were South Slavs; a lesser part was made up of Germans and Hungarians. The number of Hungarians increased gradually owing to in-migration and the continuous assimilation of the Roman Catholic South Slavic people. In this tendency of assimilation it was the religious and not the linguistic aspect that played a considerable role. In 1767 about 2200 Roman Catholic South Slavic and 200 Roman Catholic Germans lived in the town. The Catholic parishes were led by the Franciscan order. The significance of the similar-sized community of Serbs is indicated by the fact that they had twelve popes and two churches in the town (Muhi 1944; Bárth 2005, 273–275).

In 1766 a Croatian Franciscan friar, Rochus Szmendrovich, arrived in town. The way he tended the flock as well as his preaching and healing activity soon made him the most popular priest in the town. About this Franciscan friar's exorcising activity, which he performed for two years, quite a considerable number of documents have been preserved in the archives of the Kalocsa diocese.

The supervising ecclesiastical authorities found the exorcizing activities disquieting out of various considerations, and after two years they made the friar leave the town. From our point of view it is the exorcism performed on Orthodox people that is of outstanding importance. The friar began exorcism at the end of 1766, which action was soon well-known both in the town and its vicinity. Among the people that came together on this occasion several Orthodox Serbs appeared too. The presence of dissidents in a Roman Catholic church and their participation in the Roman Catholic liturgy made way to anxiety, and the friar was soon reported the ecclesiastical authorities. Rochus friar treated altogether nineteen Orthodox people who were considered as possessed by the devil. Half of these people lived in the town of Zombor; while the other ones arrived from the neighbouring Serbian villages to town.

We should remark here that all of these nineteen people were *women*. In course of the legal proceeding Rochus argued in his defence that after the news about his first exorcism had spread around, more and more dissidents, suffering from various diseases, paid a visit to him, and that he examined about thirty out of them and diagnosed in the case of these above mentioned nineteen women the signs of real devilish obsession. In vain did he tell these people to go and see their popes and monks; they replied that they had already made attempts but these failed. Later, several people from among those who had been delivered from evil or, rather from devil as well as some spectators *converted* to Roman Catholicism. The members of the town's municipal council who, in course of these two years of exorcist activity perpetually assisted popular Rochus, referred to this conversion of Orthodox people as a defensive argument. The conversion-driving force of the Franciscan friar was utilised not only in course of exorcisms. In the *historia domus* of the

convent of Zombor it was recorded that in 1767 Rochus Szmendrovich provided spiritual comfort for an Orthodox convict, as a consequence of which the man, prior to his execution, converted to Roman Catholicism.

If we take a look at the fairly *belated* date of these events, we might come to the issue of how the spectacular exorcist deeds that were at that time almost completely repressed in western Europe survived in this classical border-area of western and eastern Christianity, in this market town of Bácska incorporating the two religious and cultural forms. An inverse parallel tendency can be drawn between the mentality of Serbs in Zombor who, being disappointed at the magical abilities of their own popes turned to a Roman Catholic friar, and the Roman Catholic and Calvinist Hungarians in Transylvania who visited Rumanian priests so as to be provided with similar services. (Keszeg 1996; Komáromi 1996)

The protagonist of this story can also be interpreted as one of the *transmitters* of the *medieval ecclesiastical practice* in the early modern era. It was the Franciscan order that transmitted and kept alive medieval ecclesiastical benediction and exorcism for the longest time in Hungary. This practice of the Franciscans during the 17th and 18th centuries, owing to the gradually altered ecclesiastical mentality – became unofficial and allowed only tacitly. Owing to this change in mentality in this story from the 18th century not only the diocese authority but a part of the Franciscans in Zombor also opposed this charismatic personality (Hoško 2000; Midelfort 2005; Bárh 2008).

As a summary that is based upon not really the instances and cases having been presented here but upon my former sets of investigations, I would claim that in Bácska during the 18th century a *relative harmony of religious co-existence* can be observed. This more or less idyllic situation can especially be appreciated from a retrospective view being aware of the blood-soaked and painful history of the 19th and chiefly the 20th centuries. This period was prior to the general spread of the 19th and 20th century idea of *nationalism*, which, in this region, was always necessarily connected to religious contents. The presence of *religious tolerance* could have been promoted by the fact that in this region that was re-inhabitated in the 18th century, there were no original inhabitants, there was not one dominant nationality, ethnic group or denomination, since the population was made up of new-comers. As long as the sense of being a new-comer was preserved and kept alive, religious life was subject to this relative tolerance. When this sense and identity disappeared, completely different views and values began to dominate. But all these are beyond my presentation's theme and scope of competence.

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A nyugati és a keleti kereszténység határán

Vallási együttélés és konfliktusok a dél-magyarországi Bácskában a 18. században
(Összefoglalás)

A tanulmány az etnikai és vallási tekintetben egyaránt rendkívül sokszínű Bácska példáján mutatja be a vallási együttélés 18. századi lehetőségeit és korlátait. A bácskai népesedéstörténet rövid vázlatát után a szerző saját levéltári kutatási eredményeit foglalja össze a témában. A kiválasztott terület vegyes lakosságú településeinek mindennapi életéről tájékoztató egyházi források (főként a püspöki vizitációk jegyzőkönyvei) segítségével nem csupán az államhatalom részéről is támogatott római katolikus egyházi törekvések, hanem a nem katolikus felekezetek mozgástere, illetve a „népi” kezdeményezések is nyomon követhetők. A katolikus és ortodox felekezeti együttélés kapcsán a szent szövegek (archaikus imádságok), a szent helyek (szentkutak) és a szentemberek közös „használatára”, kölcsönhatásaira lehetett rámutatni. Utóbbira példaként egy, az 1760-as években Zomborban tevékenykedő ferences szerzetes alakja került középpontba, aki ördögűző-gyógyító tevékenységével valamennyi környékbeli felekezet és népcsoport körében kiemelkedő népszerűségnek örvendett. A tanulmány konklúziója szerint – különösen a későbbi századok viszonylatában – a 18. században még egyfajta relatív harmónia tapasztalható a régióban a vallási (és ezzel szoros kapcsolatban az etnikai) együttélés tekintetében, amely körülmény vélhetően az újkorban újranepesedett terület lakosságának „jövevény-tudat”-ával hozható összefüggésbe.